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AUTHOR Peyton, Joy Kreeft; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study of the writing of 12 sixth-grade students of English as a second language (ESL) compared the quantity and maturity of writing in three assigned tasks and unassigned entries in dialogue journals. The assigned tasks varied in topic control, audience, and purpose. Qualities of the writing were examined using measures of quantity, complexity, topic focus, and cohesion. Results show that the quantity and maturity of the dialogue journal writing was at least equivalent to that of the assigned writing on all measures, and in many cases showed more complex linguistic expression. The findings suggest that ESL students may explore and demonstrate a more complete range of their writing abilities in unassigned writing about personally chosen topics than in assigned writing about teacher-selected topics. It is argued, therefore, that both kinds of writing are a necessary part of an ESL writing program. (Author/MSE)

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Beyond Writing Assignments:

The Influence of Communicative Context on ESL Students' Writing

Joy Kreeft Peyton, Jana Staton, Gina Richardson, Walt Wolfram

Center for Applied Linguistics

1118 22nd St., N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20037

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of an in-depth study of 12 sixth grade ESL students' writing by comparing three assigned tasks with unassigned writing in dialogue journals. The tasks vary along the parameters of topic control, audience, and purpose. Qualities of the writing were examined using measures of quantity, complexity, topic focus, and cohesion. Results show that the quantity and maturity of the dialogue journal writing is at least equivalent to the assigned writing on all measures, and in many cases shows more complex linguistic expression. The results suggest that ESL students may explore and demonstrate a more complete range of their writing abilities in unassigned writing about self-chosen topics than in assigned writing about teacher-chosen topics. It is argued therefore that although a variety of assigned writing tasks are essential for developing students' expressive abilities in various writing contexts, unassigned writing in which students choose their own topics and purpose is also a necessary part of an ESL writing program.

Beyond Writing Assignments:
The Influence of Communicative Context on ESL Students' Writing

Introduction

In studying the developing writing ability of limited English proficient students, we need to understand what kinds of writing situations and tasks are most helpful for moving them toward increasingly more fluent and coherent expression of their ideas, feelings and experiences. This paper reports the findings of an in-depth study of the writing of sixth grade students learning English as a second language (ESL) on a variety of different writing tasks, ranging from assigned essays to self-directed writing in dialogue journals. The study focuses on specific linguistic features of the students' texts in the attempt to understand how features of the writing might be encouraged by different kinds of tasks, representing varied communicative contexts. The study contributes to the ongoing discussion of the usefulness of providing opportunities for informal writing about student-chosen topics as part of an overall program for developing writing competence among limited English proficient students.

The role of communicative context in writing development

Communication theorists, sociolinguists, and language ethnographers studying spoken communication have shown clearly that dimensions of the communicative context, such as communicative purpose, relationship of speaker to audience, and

message topic or content, can affect parameters of spoken discourse. However, only recently has thoughtful consideration been given to the effect of communicative context on written text production. The traditional assumption has been that writing is a single skill, which develops in a fairly linear and global fashion, independent of the communicative context in which the text was produced or the particular demands of the text itself.

Literacy theorists such as Street (1984), however, argue that written expression, like spoken discourse, is highly context-bound, so that the qualities of written products are influenced by the communicative contexts in which they occur, and a number of researchers have called for the examination of the social contexts within and through which writing develops (Florio-Ruane, 1983; Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987; Scardemalia & Bereiter, 1986). At the same time, a growing body of research with limited English proficient students has begun to show that contextual factors, such as teacher expectations about writing, purposes for writing, and the relationship of writer to audience, play a considerable role in the products that these students produce and in their progress over time as writers (Ammon, 1985; Edelsky, 1986; Hudelson, 1986, in press; and cf. Zamel, 1987 for a review of studies with native English speaking and limited English proficient students). Hudelson (1986), for example, in examining various kinds of writing by fourth grade ESL students, found significant variation within each child's work:

> The children responded differently to different assignments and produced pieces varying both in quantity and in quality. No single piece of writing by itself provided as complete a picture of each child as a writer as did an examination of all the pieces, assigned and unassigned, produced by each child. (p. 48)

Since the importance of contextual factors in the production of written text is now clear, teachers and researchers working with limited English proficient students are particularly interested in determining the contribution of various contexts to the writing development of these students.

Dialogue journal writing as one context for development

This interest in effective contexts for writing development raises the question of the relative value of what might be called "unassigned writing." In this kind of writing, students choose their own topics and decide the purpose of their writing, how much time they will spend writing, and how much they will write. The result might be responded to in some way by the teacher, but it is not evaluated. Calkins (1983, 1986) and Graves (1983) first advocated unassigned writing for native English speaking children, and the "writing workshop" concept, in which children write out of their own experience, has spread to ESL classrooms as well. Another type of unassigned writing is done in dialogue journals, which also originated with native English speakers (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft, & Reed, 1982), and have become

increasingly common with ESL students. Dialogue journals provide a regular (daily or weekly) opportunity for students to write to their teacher (or teacher aide) about topics of their own choosing, and to receive a written response to each entry about the content of the entry. Over time, an ongoing written dialogue between students and the teacher develops (Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed, & Morroy, 1984; Staton, Shuy, Kreeft, & Reed, 1982, 1988).

Some educators might question the value of the informal written interaction that occurs in dialogue journals (and other types of unassigned writing) for promoting the writing development of limited English proficient students. Such writing, which often does not involve much prior planning or revision and which often focuses on personal topics (Staton et al., 1988), might not contain or develop features of more "academic" writing, such as expository essays. Scardemalia and Bereiter (1986), for example, question how such non-assigned, open-content writing tasks call upon the higher processes involved in expert writing and remark that "expressive" writing (a term that originated with Britton, 1982), "may be limited in the kinds and levels of writing abilities it can be expected to foster. Thus there is reason, from an instructional viewpoint, to regard expressive writing as a preliminary or bridge to other kinds of writing" (p. 793).

This viewpoint comes from a developmental view of writing maturity in which a writer begins with expressive writing of the type that might occur in dialogue journals, but later grows out

of it to more complex types of expression, to "formal, disciplined writing on academic and impersonal themes" which is more difficult, and "which is less immediate to the writer's concrete, everyday experience" (Freedman & Calfee, 1984, pp. 472-473). However, it remains to be empirically demonstrated that such academic writing by itself naturally elicits all of the valued features of writing which we want students, particularly those who are less proficient in English, to develop and practice. It also remains to be demonstrated that unassigned, personal writing does not elicit such features. While students should have many opportunities to practice formal, academic writing, it is important to examine the role that informal writing about self-chosen topics might play in writing development as well.

This Study

Purpose

This study sets out to examine how aspects of the communicative context in which writing occurs might influence the written expression of limited English proficient students. In particular, we seek to compare students' writing in dialogue journals with their assigned writing. Our framework for looking at communicative context draws on the work of Tannen (1982), Biber (1986), Scardemalia and Bereiter (1986), and language ethnographers (Basso, 1974; Hymes, 1964), who show how factors such as purpose, topic, and audience influence the nature of

texts, spoken and written. Contextual dimensions might be arranged in a series of continuua as follows:

PURPOSE

intrinsic/communication ---------- extrinsic/evaluation

TOPIC

self-chosen ----------pre-determined

AUDIENCE

familiar ---------- unknown

In this study, we focus on features of the writing that can be quantified and examined systematically across writing tasks, regardless of genre, topic, or purpose. Specifically, we have chosen to look at the quantity, complexity, focus, and cohesive quality of the writing.

Our investigation focuses on the extent to which dialogue journal writing, which is relatively unplanned, interactive, and personal results in extended text production, with features that are valued in more formal, planned written text--topic elaboration, complex structures, and within-text cohesion. Since students choose their own topics to write about in the dialogue journals, we are also interested in whether this writing is concerned solely with immediate acquaintances and personal

experiences, or whether the students write about more non-immediate and academic topics as well.

Data

The data come from the writing done in a sixth grade class of limited English proficient students, in Los Angeles, California. All of the extended writing that they did during one week in the spring was collected for analysis. This excludes brief, one-word or one-sentence writing done on tests and exercises, and includes five dialogue journal entries (the students wrote in their dialogue journals daily throughout the year), and the two texts that the teacher assigned during the week. None of this writing was assigned for the specific purposes of the research. Therefore, it represents the writing that occurred naturally in this classroom context rather than experimentally controlled writing tasks. To supplement these two assigned texts, a third one, written a month later as part of a test taken by all sixth graders, was added. Since the students did not routinely revise their dialogue journal writing, the assigned texts examined were the first drafts, before revision, in order to provide comparability. Relevant characteristics of the writing are as follows:

A letter to another teacher in the school (April 6) who had donated a set of Wildlife Encyclopedias to the class. Most of the students did not know the teacher personally, but they had seen him in school and they knew he had donated the books. Although the letter involved functional

communication, the classroom teacher assigned the topic, "Write a thank you letter to Mr. M," outlined the points to be covered, helped many students write parts of the letter, and corrected and graded the letters before they were sent.

A compare/contrast essay (April 9), using information from the social studies unit the students had been working on all semester. The topic, "Compare and contrast the grasslands and the desert," was assigned by the teacher, and the students used their class notes to write it. The purpose of the essay was for evaluation, and there was no specified audience (beside the teacher as evaluator).

A letter to a friend (May 15), telling them why they should watch a particular television show. The purpose of the letter was for evaluation, as it was part of a test that all sixth grade students took at the end of the year. While the topic was assigned, the students chose the show they would recommend and the friend they would write to.

Dialogue journal (April 6-10). As part of their daily routine throughout the school year, the students were required to write a minimum of three sentences a day in their dialogue journals. Beyond that stipulation, they were free to decide what to write, when to write, and how much to write. The teacher wrote to the students each time they wrote, roughly matching the length of their entries. (The teacher's writing has been examined elsewhere [Kreeft et

al., 1984; Peyton & Seyoum, 1988]. In this paper we focus entirely on the students' writing.)

Table 1 shows the four types of writing and the contextual dimensions of each. We see, for example, that the dialogue journal and the essay differ on all dimensions. The dialogue journal was written to communicate to a familiar audience about self-chosen topics. In contrast, the essay was written to be evaluated by the teacher and was about a teacher-chosen topic. The other two texts share features of the dialogue journal or the essay to varying degrees.

Insert Table 1 about here

From the 26 students in the class, a sample of 12 was chosen, equally distributed by sex, ethnicity (6 were Asian, from the Philippines, Burma, Korea, Vietnam, and China, and 6 were Hispanic, from El Salvador and Mexico), and English language proficiency (4 were judged by the teacher to be highly proficient in English at the end of the year, 4 had mid-level proficiency, and 4, low proficiency; the teacher's judgment was verified by students' scores on the language section of a test that all sixth graders took at the end of the year). The time the students had spent in schools in the United States at the beginning of the school year ranged from 1 month to 5 years (two students were born here and had spent five years in U.S. schools; however, since their parents were Asian or Hispanic and they spoke Chinese

or Spanish at home and in their community, they were still considered limited English proficient).

To provide a more detailed picture of overall linguistic patterns found in the writing of all 12 students, more in-depth analysis of 3 of the students, selected as representative of the three proficiency groups, is also presented. Ben, from the Philippines and a native speaker of Tagalog, represents a high-proficiency student. He had been in American schools for two and a half years at the beginning of the school year. Although he is among the most proficient in English of the 12 students in this study, he was classified as limited English proficient by the school and his writing shows evidence of his being a nonnative English speaker. Martin, one of the mid-proficiency students, was a native Spanish speaker from Mexico and had been in the United States for four years when the school year began. SuKyong, from Korea, is one of the low-proficiency students. She joined the class late in the school year, a month after arriving in the United States, with very little knowledge of English, and began writing in a dialogue journal as soon as she started school.

Measures of Writing Performance

In order to develop a methodology for comparing very different kinds of texts, we excluded discourse features which might be specific to only one kind of text. For example, other studies of dialogue journal writing (Shuy, 1988; Staton, 1982, in a pilot study that led to this paper) have shown that it tends to

contain a wide variety of language functions or speech acts (complaining, reporting opinions, promising, questioning) that are not generally elicited in assigned classroom writing. By the same token, if we were to look at text organization, we might find that essays about academic content are more highly organized than letters and dialogue journals, since they are based on class notes and outlines and often follow class discussion about structure and organization. Each kind of writing has its own specific qualities.

We sought instead to identify features of the writing that are not necessarily influenced by the specific task or genre involved and so can be compared across the sample of texts available to us, and that at the same time are among traditional measures of writing development. The four features chosen are quantity, complexity, focus, and cohesiveness.

Quantity

Although mere quantity of writing is not necessarily an indication of quality, it does indicate a desire or willingness to write, especially when students are not required to write a specified amount. For students learning English as a second language, greater quantity of writing also provides more practice in using written English. Because the students in this study were required to write only three sentences a day in their journals and were given no specific time to write (they found time during individual work periods, before school, or during lunch or recess), we wondered how the amount of writing done in

the journals would compare to that in the assigned pieces, for which considerable class time was given.

Quantity was determined by the number of words written on each assigned text, or each day in the dialogue journals. Table 2 shows the mean number of words written per day in the dialogue journals during the sample week and on the two assigned texts written the same week (the letter to a friend is excluded from the table, since it was written a month later). It also shows the mean number of words written during the entire week in the journals and assigned writing.

When we compare the total amount written for one week in the journals and in the assigned texts, we see that the journals result in considerably more writing--more than three times as much (this difference is significant, based upon the results of a *t* test). Even on a daily basis, the students tended to write more in their journals than they did on the assigned texts (although the standard deviations for the writing tasks are quite high and therefore the differences are not statistically significant when subjected to a one-way analysis of variance).

Insert Table 2 about here

What we find from this simple measure of writing quantity is that the dialogue journals gave the students substantially more practice with written expression than did any other type of writing done in class during the same period of time. As will be

seen later, this greater written output provided the opportunity for the use of a variety of linguistic structures that are important to the production of written text, but that did not typically appear in assigned texts.

Complexity

Most studies comparing speech and writing have found that formal, planned, written text is syntactically more complex, with a greater number of clause embeddings and a greater variety of clause connectors, than face-to-face informal interaction, which often consists of a "stringing together of idea units" connected with and (Chafe, 1982; Clancy, 1982). Therefore, one important aspect of the writing development of ESL students is the ability to produce complex clause structures and to use a variety of clause connectors. In this study, we are particularly interested in how clause complexity and variety of connectors in dialogue journal writing, which is interactive, less formal and relatively unplanned, compares with writing on assigned texts, some of which involved a considerable amount of planning.

Clause complexity was measured by the number of clauses per T-unit, "a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and nonclausal structures attached to or embedded in it" (Hunt, 1970, p. 4). Table 3 shows the clause complexity of the writing on the four tasks for each student (because variation in clause complexity may be related to English language proficiency, the students are listed under their proficiency group; however, no statistical measures were applied to the proficiency variable

because of the limited number of subjects in each proficiency level). A one-way analysis of variance was conducted in order to determine if there was a significant difference across the four writing tasks.

Insert Table 3 about here

There are significant differences in syntactic complexity based on the type of writing task, but the differences are not in the direction that we might expect, with greater complexity in the essay. In fact, the informal writing in the dialogue journals is as complex as the most complex piece of writing, the letter to a friend. There is a high correlation between these two (as indicated by a Pearson r product moment correlation of .89) and a significant difference between these and the essay, the least complex piece of writing ($t = 2.552$, $p<.05$, for the dialogue journal and essay; $t = 3.873$, $p<.001$, for the letter to a friend and essay).

Here we also begin to see the effect of the communicative context on the writing produced. The most complex writing occurs in the letter which, like the dialogue journal, had a communicative purpose, and was written to a familiar audience, about a topic related to the students' own experience. In contrast, the least complex writing is in the essay, which had no communicative purpose and was written to no particular audience

beside the teacher as evaluator, about a topic removed from the students' immediate experience.

Another feature often associated with writing complexity is the syntactic marking of relationships between clauses with relational and subordinating conjunctions, or clause connectors. Words like and, because, but, if, why "act as clues drawing attention to and making explicit the logical relationship between propositions" (McClure & Steffensen, 1985, p. 218), and thus "expressing the mental processes that writers perform as they move from sentence to sentence" (Horowitz, 1985, p. 448). Since all students must be able to express such relationships in their writing, we are interested in the extent to which these ESL students use clause connectors in their dialogue journals as compared with their assigned writing. A typology of clause connectors was adapted from those of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) and Halliday and Hasan (1976).

Because it would be difficult to display the full inventory of different connectors used by all 12 students in the study, Table 4 lists those used by the subgroup of students described earlier (Ben, Martin, and SuKyong). The pattern shown here is consistent in the writing of all 12 students. That is, a much greater variety of connectors appears in the dialogue journals than in the assigned texts; in most cases there are at least twice as many different connectors in the journals, and in some cases considerably more than twice as many. The variety of

connectors used in the essay is limited almost entirely to and, because, but, and that.

Insert Table 4 about here

SuKyong (from the low English proficiency group) used no connectors at all in her assigned texts. It is only in her dialogue journal writing that we see any evidence of her ability to make connections between ideas with her use of because, so, and but (e.g., "My home has a problem because my daddy is mad"; "I couldn't write that so Sandra helped me"; "Lenore has my pencil, but she never gives it to me").

In his assigned writing, Martin (from the mid proficiency group) used primarily the most basic kinds of connectors, and and because (McClure & Steffensen, 1985). However, his range of connectors increases considerably in the dialogue journal; he expressed cause and effect (so), purpose (so that), comparison (bigger than), temporal relations (then, after, before) and hypothetical conditions ("he was lucky that the police was not there because if he was there he would have given him a ticket").

Ben (from the high proficiency group) also used connectors in his dialogue journal that do not appear elsewhere--hypothetical conditions, comparisons, contrast ("I am so glad that that someone who took it by mistake returned it instead of keeping it by him or herself"), and qualification ("That's too

bad that you only saw a part of the Oscars. Well at least you saw a part of it; that's better than not seeing it").

What these patterns make clear is that the considerable amount of writing done each week in the dialogue journals provided these ESL students with a unique opportunity to express linguistically complex relationships that do not appear in their other writing.

The effect of communicative context can again be seen in the variety of clause connectors used. Table 5 shows the difference in variety of clause connectors in the letter to a friend and the essay, the two assigned texts whose contexts differ the most. The number of different connectors is divided by the total number of clauses in the texts to arrive at the percentage of different connectors. The letters have a significantly greater variety of connectors than the essay (based on the application of a *t* test for matched pairs), and nine out of the eleven students whose writing can be compared used a wider range of connectors in the letter than in the essay.

Insert Table 5 about here

Another way to compare the use of connectors in the different writing tasks is to examine the frequency of and relative to other connectors. And is generally considered to be among the simplest conjunctions (McClure & Steffensen, 1985), used with great frequency by immature writers (Hunt, 1965; Loban,

1963; O'Donnell, Griffin, & Norris, 1967). Table 6 shows the percentage of and relative to all of the connectors used on the four writing tasks. The lower frequencies of and occur in the letter to a friend and the dialogue journal (a chi-square test indicates that the difference is significant). This finding plus our previous finding, that a greater variety of connectors occurs in the letter and the dialogue journals, indicate that the students were expressing more complex relationships among ideas in these texts.

Insert Table 6 about here

From these analyses of complexity, it appears that ESL students' demonstration of linguistic complexity in writing may be enhanced by opportunities to communicate real messages, about topics they are familiar with, to an audience that they know. The letter to a friend had these characteristics (although it was written in a testing situation) and elicited more complex writing than did the other two writing assignments. Likewise, the dialogue journal, which also had these characteristics, resulted in more complex writing. Interestingly, the grasslands/desert essay, which was supported by considerable classroom discussion and notes, did not generate the levels of linguistic complexity that the students were capable of, and expressed, in the dialogue journal and the letter.

Focus

Another important aspect of learning to write is the ability to write about topics outside of one's own experience. There may be a number of ways to determine topic focus, but our analysis here follows Stotsky (1986), who examined the focus of high-rated and low-rated essays of native English speaking high school students by examining the grammatical subjects of clauses. She found that the low-rated essays focused on personal topics. The majority of clause subjects were pronouns (I, you, we) or nouns referring to people (students, teacher, kids), and few subjects were nouns that referred to objects or concepts (purpose, idea, test, etc.). These writers were making assertions about themselves, their audience, or people, "using structures of conversational utterances . . . suggesting that they viewed essay writing more as an engagement in a dialogue with another speaker than as a transaction with a reader" (p. 285). The high-rated essays, however, had a non-personal focus, with a greater number of non-personal nouns as clause subjects. These writers were making assertions about objects and concepts, rather than about people. Stotsky argues that to develop students' writing abilities, perhaps they need to be steered away from "conversational" writing to activities that "help them frame ideas in more intellectually beneficial ways" (p. 287).

Stotsky's work raises the question of how the focus of the dialogue journal writing, which is by nature dialogic, compares with that of the assigned writing of the students in this study. We know from previous studies of dialogue journals that the

writing tends to be personal (see especially Staton et al., 1982). But do these ESL students focus entirely on themselves and people and events in their immediate environment, or do they branch out to more distant people and events or more abstract concepts? To examine these questions, a tabulation of clause subjects following Stotsky was performed. Subjects were categorized as "non-personal," referring to events, objects, or ideas (grasslands, desert), or "personal." The personal category was further divided into "personal close," referring to the writers themselves or someone they knew personally (I, Ben, Mrs. Reed), and "personal distant," related to people they knew about but did not know personally (the people who made the movie "Star Wars"). Nouns and pronouns were combined in all three categories.

For all 12 students, the dialogue journal writing, letter to a friend, and letter to another teacher clearly have a personal focus, with a high percentage of "personal" clause subjects--81%, 79%, and 70% respectively. However, the high percentage of personal subjects in the dialogue journals does not mean that they are restricted to personal writing only. The personal nature of the writing seems to depend in part on the proficiency level of the student, as indicated by patterns in the writing of the subgroup of three students. SuKyong, the low-proficiency student, focused almost entirely on personal topics, related to her own experiences ("personal close"), with a high percentage of

I subjects (53%). This pattern is shown in these two passages from her journal (clause subjects are underlined).

> miss read. I can ray [can't write] the paper thing. I can rat that [can't write that] so Sandra help me.
>
> **********
>
> today Easter party is fun Miss Reed yesterday nate [night] I'm so happy mrs. reed I telly you naxmuns [I will tell you why next month - she means next week; she wrote this entry the day before spring vacation]

Martin, the mid-proficiency student, like SuKyong, has a high percentage of "personal close" subjects. However, he moved beyond himself and his own experiences to focus on other people (only 30% of his clause subjects are I). This pattern is shown in the following narrative.

> Yasterday a man came to fix our bathroom because he wanted to change the bathtop [bathtub] because it was breaking and it was dangerous and someone could of fallen down because it was cracked. Then the man changed the sinck because it was falling down. the man was a very nice man, and he said he was going to come back tomorrow.

Ben, the high-proficiency student, moved beyond experiences he was directly involved in and people in his immediate environment to write also about people outside his immediate experience ("personal distant") and academic, non-personal topics ("non-personal"). For example, he wrote about his grasslands/

desert project, in a piece that shows considerably more personal interest than his assigned essay on the same topic. Both pieces are shown here.

Dialogue journal

The grasslands that we are doing is Europe. . . . I found most of the information I wanted so far that I needed and the ones that you said to do. . . . I got a chance to look at all those weird bones. They're weird because I usually see them with their skin, and bones, hair and with their eyes or eyeballs. Where did you get all of those bones.? Did you get them from the deserts? I feel sorry for the turtles or the animals that lived in the deserts and got run over by those cruel men and women that runned over those sweet, nice, adorable animals. I like and loved tame animals.

Grasslands/desert essay

The difference between the grassland is the grassland has water. And it also has grass. And it also has animals (like cows, chickens, dogs).

The difference between the grassland and the dessert is the people that lives in the dessert move from one place (that has water) to the other. The dessert has only have few waters. The desert has only a few people that lives there.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of "personal close," "personal distant," and "non-personal" subjects used in the

dialogue journals by Ben, Martin, and SuKyong. There is an increase from SuKyong to Ben in the use of non-personal subjects and personal distant subjects, with a corresponding decrease in the use of personal close subjects.

Insert Figure 1 about here

SuKyong's writing focuses primarily on herself and her own experiences, with a high percentage of I subjects (53%), as shown in In contrast to the dialogue journal writing, only 21% of the clause subjects in the essays are "personal." However, this does not mean that the students were necessarily "framing ideas in more intellectually beneficial ways," as Stotsky's work suggests. The essays of all of the students except one were highly repetitious, with the majority of clause subjects being repetitions of the words grasslands and desert or pronouns referring to them (as we can see in Ben's essay, above). SuKyong, one of the low-proficiency students, did not write an essay at all, but copied another student's essay. Another low-proficiency student wrote lists of similarities and differences, copied from his class notes.

Writing with a sustained academic focus seemed to be very difficult for almost all of these students. As a result, while it is important that they learn to do such writing well, it is not clear that more conversational, personal writing is something they need to be "steered away from." This writing seemed to

allow them to move of their own volition beyond their immediate experience to explore and reflect on the topics they were studying in school, as they were ready. Those who were not ready to make that move were allowed daily practice with writing about personal topics that they knew a great deal about.

Cohesiveness

Another aspect of learning to write is the ability to produce extended text that functions as a cohesive unit. Although this study has focused primarily on sentence-level features of the students' writing, it is important to consider the writing as text, beyond the sentence, as well. The assigned writing naturally encouraged the production of topic-focused text, since the topic was specified. However, there were no such topic constraints on the dialogue journal writing. The students could write about as many different topics as they chose within each entry, and elaborate on them as they chose. Writing about a given topic could consist of as little as a question or a brief response to a question.

Given the flexibility of topic choice and elaboration in dialogue journal writing, we may initially ask whether the dialogue journals contain any extended texts focused on one topic. When the journal entries are divided on the basis of topics, we find that they do contain extended texts. Although not all of the writing in the journals takes the form of such texts, those of most of the students contain texts that are

roughly comparable in length to their assigned texts written during the same time period.

A related question pertains to the cohesive quality of these dialogue journal texts as compared to the assigned texts--the extent to which they create a sense of connected discourse, and the way that this is accomplished. Halliday and Hasan (1976) use the term "lexical cohesion" to describe the way that words in a text function to establish coherence, and studies of students' writing have shown that the use of cohesive ties in a piece of writing relates to impressions of its overall quality (Stotsky, 1986; Witte & Faigley, 1981). Stotsky, for example, in a study of the writing of high school students, found the number and type of cohesive ties used to be an important indication of quality--high-rated essays contained more and a greater variety of cohesive ties than low-rated essays.

To examine the cohesive quality of the dialogue journal and assigned writing, three extended texts were selected from each student's dialogue journal during the one-week sample period. After the entries were divided by topic, all topics that could be considered "text" (a minimum of three T-units long was the criterion used) were extracted. To establish comparability, the three that were the closest in length to the three assigned texts were selected for cohesion analysis.

Following Stotsky, the number and types of cohesive ties used in the three journal and three assigned texts were determined. Categorization of cohesive ties followed the

taxonomy first outlined by Halliday and Hasan and adapted and extended by Stotsky. This taxonomy and the analytical procedures followed are explained in the appendix and applied in an analysis of cohesion for a portion of one dialogue journal text.

Table 7 shows comparisons between the dialogue journals and assigned texts on three measures of cohesive quality: number of cohesive ties per text, number of different ties per text, and frequency of Repetition as a cohesive tie relative to the other ties used.

Insert Table 7 about here

There is no significant difference among texts (based on a one-way analysis of variance) in terms of mean number of cohesive ties and mean number of different ties. However, there is a significant difference among texts with respect to the relative frequency of Repetition as a cohesive tie (determined on the basis of a one-way analysis of variance). Although Repetition is a frequently used tie in all of the texts, accounting for a third to almost half of the ties used (Stotsky also found a high percentage of Repetition, in both high- and low-rated essays), it is used less frequently in the dialogue journal and the letter to a friend. This means that the students used a variety of other types of ties rather than simply repeating words. The grasslands/desert essay shows the greatest use of Repetition (used up to 75% of the time by some students). Martin's essay,

for example, was connected primarily by repetition of the words grasslands and desert.

When we look more closely at the use of particular cohesive ties by individual students, we find indications of more advanced cohesive relations occurring in the journals. Table 8 shows the cohesive ties used by Ben, Martin, and SuKyong and their frequency.

Insert Table 8 about here

In SuKyong's two assigned texts, a new proposition is introduced in almost every sentence, and there is little sense of flow from sentence to sentence. Her dialogue journal texts, however, although they are very brief, tend to hang together more coherently and function as a more cohesive unit. Two of her dialogue journal texts are shown here (cohesive items are underlined):

today I come to the school lurae and Sandra is mad at me I dot no way I no I won't to laurae s huse she fak me

[Today I came to school. Laura and Sandra are mad at me. I don't know why. I know I won't go to Laura's house. She fights with me.--This is text 1 for SuKyong in Table 8]

****

Yesterday. My home has a plablum by cuse my daddy is mad to hem. he dring king the beer I mad to my daddy.

[Yesterday my home had a problem because my daddy was mad [?]. He was drinking beer. I am mad at my daddy.--This is text 2 for SuKyong in Table 8]

SuKyong used pronominal reference to refer to previously identified people and concepts ("I won't go to Laura's house. She fights with me"), ellipsis, which relies on a previous proposition ("laura and Sandra are mad at me. I don't know why [they are mad at me]"), and collocation, by making a general statement about her father's problem and then giving details ("My home had a problem because my daddy was mad . . . he was drinking beer"). None of these types of cohesion occur in her assigned texts.

Likewise, Martin used cohesive ties in his dialogue journal that were not typical of his assigned writing. His grasslands/desert essay contains little relationship among ideas, most connections are simply repetitions of grasslands and desert. Those ties coded as Oppositions (the only Oppositions used in his assigned writing) are actually simple negations of earlier statements ("The grasslands have many crops . . . The desert does not have any crops"). In the journal, Martin set up true Oppositions, that go beyond simple negation (for example, "he was lucky that the police was not there because if he was there he would have given him a ticket"). He also established Collocational chains, something he rarely did in his assigned writing. In the passage below, bathroom, bathtub, and sink form

a Collocational chain, as do was breaking, was dangerous, could have fallen down, was cracked, and was falling down.

> Yasterday a man came to fix our bathroom because he wanted to change the bathtop [bathtub] because it was breaking and it was dangerous and someone could of fallen down because it was cracked. then the man changed the sinck because it was falling down. the man was a very nice man, and he said he was going to come back tomorrow. [This is text 2 for Martin in Table 8]

In this passage he also set up a Temporal relation between yesterday and tomorrow, again something he did not do in his assigned writing.

Ben also used cohesive ties in his dialogue journal that occur infrequently or not at all in his other writing, including a number of Oppositions (9 in the dialogue journal, compared to 3 in his other writing--"When I teach I want the best students and kids in the school . . . I certainly don't want . . . the people that always gets in trouble . . ."). He also set up a number of Temporal relations (4 in one of his dialogue journal texts)--"For this morning and this afternoon I ignored the small camera . . . they will tape or film for the rest of the school hours . . ." This type of relation occurred only once in his assigned writing.

By looking at the students' dialogue journal writing as text, we can see that even though it was produced in the context of an interaction, it still has qualities of written text, similar to the assigned writing that was intended to produce

text--similar in length in many cases, and with a similar number and variety of cohesive ties. At the same time, it shares with the letter to a friend the less frequent use of Repetition as a cohesive tie. Finally, individual students formed more advanced cohesive relations in their dialogue journal texts, expressing relationships that did not occur or occured only to a limited extent in their assigned writing.

Discussion of Findings

In this study we have considered the role that unassigned writing in dialogue journals might have for promoting the writing development of limited English proficient students, by examining how this writing, produced in the context of an informal interaction, compares with more formal, assigned writing. This specific focus on dialogue journal writing fits into a more general interest in the influence that various communicative contexts might have on the writing of these students.

We have found that the dialogue journal writing is equivalent to the more formal writing in a number of ways--it is as complex syntactically as the most complex assigned writing, it contains extended texts focused on one topic, and these texts have cohesive qualities that are similar to the assigned texts.

At the same time, the dialogue journal writing has qualities that the assigned writing does not. At the most basic level, the dialogue journals provided more opportunities for practice writing in English; the students wrote much more in a week in their dialogue journals then they wrote elsewhere. Students used

a much greater variety of clause connectors than they used elsewhere, and individual students expressed more advanced cohesive relations in their dialogue journals.

A comparison between dialogue journals on the one hand and assigned texts on the other, however, does not explain all of the variation found in the writing of these students. Aspects of the communicative context in which both the journals and the assigned writing occurred seemed to play a role as well. The dialogue journal and letter to a friend, which involved writing to a familiar audience about topics related to the students' own experiences or interests, differed in a number of ways from the other writing, written for a less familiar or unspecified audience, about topics that were not related to the students' personal experiences or interests. They showed greater clause complexity, a greater variety of clause connectors, lower relative frequency of one of the most basic connectors, and, and a lower relative frequency of Repetition as a cohesive tie. When the writing context was completely depersonalized and not as directly communicative, as was the case with the grasslands/ desert essay, most students had tremendous difficulty, producing nothing at all or writing highly repetitive text, a summary of notes taken in preparation for the assignment (even though there had been considerable class discussion about the grasslands and desert for several weeks). Ironically, while the assignment to write a planned expository piece about an academic topic resulted in simple, repetitious writing, the dialogue journals and letter

to a friend elicited the more frequent use of features which are useful in all types of writing.

Implications

These findings have several important implications for teachers working with limited English proficient students. First, as Hudelson (1986) found in her study of such students' writing, a single sample does not give a complete picture of a student's writing ability. As it turns out, the writing sample used by the school system to assess the students' writing abilities (the letter to a friend about a television show) elicited relatively complex and varied writing. If, however, the assessment task had been to write a compare/contrast essay like the grasslands/desert essay, these students would have appeared to be much weaker writers. It is only by looking at performance on a variety of writing tasks under varying conditions, that we can begin to understand the writing ability of an individual student.

Second, if we want students learning English to be able to express in writing the full range of their English facility, it may be that informal unassigned writing of the type that occurs in dialogue journals can play a significant role. Such writing appears to be more than a non-essential luxury for those teachers who simply want to "get to know" their students. It may provide opportunities for written expression not available elsewhere and thus form an important part of a writing program. Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) argue that even native

English speaking children must have opportunities for expressive writing in order to be able to express themselves fully:

> it must be that until a child does write expressively he is failing to feed into the writing process the fullness of his linguistic resources--the knowledge of words and structures he has built up in speech--and that it will take him longer to arrive at the point where writing can serve a range of his purposes as broad and diverse as the purposes for which he uses speech. (p. 82)

In a longitudinal study of the writing development of a native English speaking college student, Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman (1987) found that, while the student was in the process of learning to master the expressions and conventions of academic prose, his informal writing was important for allowing him to freely express and work through his developing ideas in writing.

> . . . the technique of using informal, expressive writing to explore new ideas had considerable heuristic power for him during the period that he had to make the adjustment from using "oral" to "literate" strategies (Tannen, 1982) in his academic papers. . . . The informal, expressive pieces Nate wrote provided him the opportunity to give free rein to his intellect. It appears that by ignoring many of the constraints imposed by the genre and register of the academic writing expected of him, he could more easily explore new ideas. (p. 27)

If such informal, exploratory writing is necessary for native English speaking children and adults, how much more important is it for students learning English?

Third, it is possible that opportunities for informal, expressive writing of the type that occurs in dialogue journals are important not only for students beginning to write in English, but for those at more advanced levels of English proficiency as well. Students learning English must learn to write expository prose about topics outside their own experience--"to perceive and articulate abstract concepts with reference to particular instances, to perceive relationships among ideas, and to reach beyond the worlds of their immediate experience" (Witte & Faigley, 1981, p. 199). However, this does not mean that they must abandon opportunities for expressive writing that dialogue journals can provide. As Moffett (1981) and Britton et al. (1975) argue, good writers do not outgrow the need for expressive language or eventually subtract themselves from their writing; they bring their personal perspective to whatever topic they are exploring and develop more mature forms of expression. "What we really want to help youngsters to learn is how to express ideas of universal value in a personal voice" (Moffett, 1981, p. 129).

The results of this study demonstrate that writing in a variety of contexts is important to the development of ESL students. In particular, dialogue journal writing turns out to be a good way to give students practice with writing and allow

them to focus on topics that they choose to explore. It is not merely written "chit chat" which might seem appropriate only during initial stages in the writing development of ESL students; it allows for higher level thinking and contains features that are valued in more formal writing. Thus, unassigned writing of the sort that can occur in dialogue journals might be an important aspect of any writing program--with high- as well as low-proficiency students--as an opportunity for them to reflect on and personalize what they are learning, consider new ideas without having to worry about particular genre and structure conventions, explore the relevance of academic content for their own lives, and make connections between academic content and their own ideas. At the same time, they can continue to develop their ability to express these ideas in writing.

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Appendix

Analysis of Cohesion

Categories of cohesive relations

1. Repetition (R): grasslands/grasslands
2. Reference (Ref): Pronouns for which the referent is stated elsewhere in the text. In this study these include personal pronouns (he, she, etc.) and demonstrative pronouns (this, these, etc.). If a pronoun is repeated throughout a text, it is categorized each time as Reference.
3. Exophoric reference (Exo): Pronouns (personal or demonstrative) that refer to information in the situation being written about rather than to another element in the text (e.g., "They deserved to win;" the referent for "they" can be inferred, but is not specified in the text).
4. Substitution (Sub): a previously mentioned item is referred to by a filler item rather than by repeating it (e.g., "I lost my new pen, but my dad bought me a new one." One is a substitute for new pen). Pronouns are not included in this category.
5. Ellipsis (E): Words that can be inferred from the context are omitted (e.g., "They move from one place that has water to the other." The other place that has water is ellipted to the other).
6. Synonymy or near-synonymy (Syn): glad/excited
7. Opposition or contrast (O): interesting/boring

8. Inclusion as a superordinate, subordinate, or coordinate member in a set (I): cows/chickens/dogs are coordinate members of a set in relation to each other and subordinate to animals.
9. Collocation (C): One lexical item is related to another through co-occurrence in similar contexts: an oscar/those two movies; school/principal.

One category not mentioned by Hallidan & Hasan or Stotsky, but which occurred in our data, was added:

10. Temporal reference (T): A connection is made between two times; "Yesterday we bought the paint, and today we painted the wall."

Analytical procedures

(See Stotsky [1986] for more detailed explanations.)

Phrases and clauses as well as individual words were counted as single lexical items. Words varying only in inflectional or comparative endings (giving/given, fair/fairer) were counted as instances of repetition. Ties within and across T-unit boundaries were counted, but conjoined items ("We ran and played") were considered as one unit. In those cases where a lexical item entered into different types of cohesive relations simultaneously with two or more previous elements, only one type of tie was recorded. A non-collocational tie was recorded in preference to a collocational one, and an inter-sentence tie was recorded in preference to an intra-sentence one. Multiple ties were noted when a group of words entered into more than one

cohesive relationship with a previous word or group of words. For example, "the Empire Strikes Back movie or the Star Wars Movie" is a synonym of "those two movies" as well as a repetition of "movie." In this case, two ties would be counted.

Sample cohesion analysis: Excerpt from a dialogue journal text

The "Empire Strikes Back" movie and also the "Star Wars" movie were really terrific and marvelous!!! Did you saw the "Empire Strikes Back" movie or the "Star Wars" movie? You should have saw those two movies. They deserved to win an oscar or an award because they have worked so hard on "The Empire Strikes Back" and also "Star Wars." The sound effects were really great and also the action effects. Like the enemies (The Empire) elephant like ship . . .

(Cohesive items are underlined.)

Cohesive Location Item	Presupposed Item	Type of Tie
the "Empire Strikes Back" movie or the "Star Wars" movie	the "Empire Strikes Back" movie and also the "Star Wars" movie	R
should have saw	saw	O-R
those two movies	the "Empire Strikes Back" movie or the "Star Wars" movie	Syn-R
they	Context	Exo
an oscar or an award	those two movies	C
they	they	Ref
"The Empire Strikes Back" and also "Star Wars"	those two movies	Syn
sound effects...and also the action effects	"The Empire Strikes Back" and also "Star Wars"	C
really great	terrific and marvelous	Syn
the enemies (The Empire) elephant like ship	sound effects...and also the action effects	I

Note: This represents only the first half of the text.

Authors' Note

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Table 1

Communicative Dimensions of Writing Tasks

	Dialogue journal (5 interactions) April 6 to 10	Letter to a friend May 15	Letter to a teacher April 6	Grasslands/ desert essay April 9
Purpose	Communication	Evaluation	Communication/ evaluation	Evaluation
Topic choice	Self-chosen	Chosen by the school system	Chosen by the teacher	Chosen by the teacher
Audience	Familiar	Familiar	Known	No particular audience specified[a]

[a]The teacher read the essays, but as an evaluator.

Table 2

Number of Words in Dialogue Journal and Assigned Writing

				Total words written during week	
Dialogue[a] journal	Letter to a teacher	Essay		Dialogue journal (5 days)	Assigned writing (2 texts)
$\bar{X}$ (SD)	$\bar{X}$ (SD)	$\bar{X}$ (SD)		$\bar{X}$ (SD)	$\bar{X}$ (SD)
126 (103.6)	77[b] (34.7)	106[c] (50.7)		632 (496.8)	168 (78.8)
ANOVA					
F ratio = 1.377, df = 2 between groups 31 within groups				t = 3.218, two-tailed t-test for matched pairs, 11 df	
p = .267 (non-significant)				p<.01	

[a]This figure represents the mean words written per day. [b]This figure is based on eleven students. One did not do this assignment. [c]This figure is based on eleven students. One student's essay was excluded because it was copied from another student.

Table 3

Mean Clauses per T-unit in Dialogue Journal and Assigned Writing

	Dialogue journal	Letter to a friend	Letter to a teacher	Essay
	$\bar{X}$	$\bar{X}$	$\bar{X}$	$\bar{X}$
High-proficiency students				
Student 1 (Ben)	1.9	2.3	2.0	1.8
Student 2	1.7	2.5	1.4	2.0
Student 3	1.9	2.5	1.5	1.7
Student 4	2.1	3.0	1.2	1.0
Mid-proficiency students				
Student 5 (Martin)	1.8	2.5	1.2	1.1
Student 6	1.7	2.2	1.9	1.8
Student 7	1.8	2.3	3.0	1.2
Student 8	1.6	2.0	-	1.2
Low-proficiency students				
Student 9 (Su Kyong)	1.1	1.1	1.0	-
Student 10	1.2	1.8	1.3	1.1
Student 11	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.0
Student 12	1.5	2.3	1.3	1.3
All students	1.7	2.1	1.5	1.3

ANOVA

F ratio = 5.618
df = 3 between groups, 42 within groups
$p<.01$

Table 4

Clause Connectors in Dialogue Journal and Assigned Writing

	Dialogue Journal	Letter to a friend	Letter to a teacher	Grasslands/ desert essay
Ben	and	and	and	and
	because	because		
	but		but	
	that	that	that	that
	[ ]	[ ]		[ ]
	so		so	
	then			
	when	when	when	
	after			
	what	what	what	
	than			
	whenever			
		how		
	who	who		
	whoever			
	why			
	like	like		
	or	or		
	until	until		
	as...as			
	at least			
	if			
	instead of			
	since			
Martin	and	and	and	and
	because	because	because	because
	but			
	that	that		
	[ ]	[ ]		
	so (cause/effect)			
	so that (purpose)			
	then		then	
	when	when		
	after			
	what			
	than			
	who			
	if			
	only that			
	also			
	before			
SuKyong	because	No connectors used	No connectors used	--
	but			
	so			

Note. [ ] indicates implicit that, as in "The difference between the grassland and desert is the grassland has water."

Table 5

Variety of Clause Connectors Used in Assigned Texts

	Letter to a friend	Essay
	%	%
Student 1 (Ben)	40.0	27.3
Student 2	24.0	40.0
Student 3	25.9	25.0
Student 4	37.5	31.4
Student 5 (Martin)	50.0	11.8
Student 6	20.0	14.3
Student 7	26.7	33.3
Student 8	33.3	18.2
Student 9 (SuKyong)	0.0*	-
Student 10	18.2	0.0*
Student 11	27.3	16.7
Student 12	38.9	19.0
Mean percent	31.1	21.6

$t = 2.202$, two-tailed t-test for matched pairs, $df = 10$

$p < .05$

Note. % = Different connectors divided by total clauses.

Table 6

Frequency and Percent of And Relative to All Connectors

Dialogue journal		Letter to a friend		Letter to a teacher		Essay	
and/Total	%	and/Total	%	and/Total	%	and/Total	%
130/602	22%	19/98	19%	20/48	42%	22/66	33%[a]

X^2 = 11.52, df = 3

$p<.01$

[a]One of the high-proficiency students showed a pattern very different from the others, using and only once out of 19 connectors. When she is excluded, the percent of and used in the essay is 44%.

Table 7

Cohesive Relations in Dialogue Journals and Assigned Texts

Mean number of cohesive ties (as a % of mean number of words)				Mean number of different ties				% of cohesive ties that are repetition			
Dialogue journal (D)	Letter to a friend (F)	Letter to a teacher[a] (T)	Essay[b] (E)	D	F	T	E	D	F	T	E
22.5	20.3	17.5	23.1	4.8	5.5	4.9	5.9	27.5	30.4	43.0	47.6

ANOVA

F ratio = 2.454
df = 3 between groups
42 within groups
p = .075 (non-significant)

ANOVA

F ratio = 1.637
df = 3 between groups
42 within groups
p = .195 (non-sig.)

ANOVA

F ratio = 3.548
df = 3 between groups
42 within groups
p<.05

Dialogue journal and letter to a teacher, t = 2.517, 10 df (two-tailed), p<.05

Dialogue journal and essay, t = 2.555, 10df (two-tailed), p<.05

Letter to a friend and letter to a teacher, t = 2.495, 10 df (two-tailed), p<.05

Note. D = Dialogue journal texts; F = Letter to a friend; T = Letter to a teacher; E = Essay

[a]This number is based on the writing of eleven students. One did not do the assignment.

[b]This number is based on the writing of ten students. One copied the essay from another student and one wrote a list.

Table 8

Cohesive Ties Dialogue Journal and Assigned Writing

Ben

	Dialogue journal texts						Assigned writing					
	1 (104 words)		2 (104 words)		3 (123 words)		Letter to a friend (138 words)		Letter to a teacher (138 words)		Essay (67 words)	
Repetition	10	36%	10	40%	7	30%	9	29%	16	62%	9	50%
Reference	4		5		5		7		0		2	
Exophoric reference	1		0		1		2		0		0	
Temporal reference	0		0		4		1		0		0	
Substitution	0		1		1		1		0		1	
Ellipsis	1		0		0		0		0		1	
Synonymy	3		0		1		6		2		0	
Opposition	4		4		1		1		1		1	
Inclusion	2		1		0		3		1		3	
Collocation	3		4		3		1		6		1	
Total ties	28		25		23		31		26		18	
Different ties	8		6		8		9		5		7	

(table continues)

Martin

	Dialogue journal texts						Assigned writing					
	1 (55 words)		2 (61 words)		3 (97 words)		Letter to a friend (48 words)		Letter to a teacher (85 words)		Essay (101 words)	
Repetition	6	46%	8	44%	6	32%	3	43%	7	44%	22	76%
Reference	2		4		4		1		3		1	
Temporal reference	0		1		0		0		0		0	
Substitution	0		0		0		0		1		0	
Ellipsis	0		0		2		0		0		0	
Synonymy	0		0		1		2		1		0	
Opposition	2		0		4		0		0		5	
Inclusion	0		0		0		1		1		0	
Collocation	3		5		2		0		3		1	
Total ties	13		18		19		7		16		29	
Different ties	4		4		6		4		6		4	

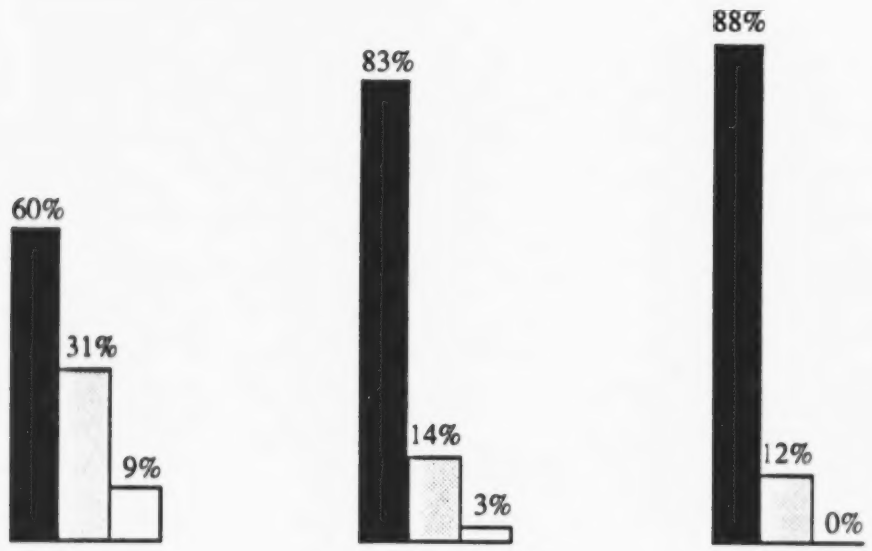
(table continues)

SuKyong

	Dialogue journal texts						Assigned writing			
	1 (27 words)		2 (24 words)		3 (15 words)		Letter to a friend (32 words)		Letter to a teacher (21 words)	
Repetition	1	25%	2	40%	1	33%	2	50%	1	50%
Reference	1		1		1		0		0	
Temporal reference	0		0		0		0		1	
Ellipsis	1		0		1		0		0	
Synonymy	0		0		0		1		0	
Inclusion	0		0		0		1		0	
Collocation	1		2		0		0		0	
Total ties	4		5		3		4		2	
Different ties	4		3		3		3		2	

Figure 1

Subjects of Clauses in Dialogue Journals



	Ben	Martin	SuKyong
Total Subjects	218	281	17

Personal close

Non-personal

Personal distant